

Women's Rage

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Feminism by itself is not the motor of change. Class, anti-imperialist, and antiracist struggles demand our participation. Yet how, specifically, does women's consciousness change? How do women move into action? How does change occur? What political strategies should feminists pursue? How, in our political work, can we constantly challenge sexual inequality when the very social construction of gender oppresses women?

In 1981 I visited Nicaragua with the goal of finding out how and why change occurred there so quickly in women's lives. "The revolution has given us everything," I was told. "Before the revolution we were totally devalued. We weren't supposed to have a vision beyond home and children." In fact, many Nicaraguan women first achieved a fully human identity within the revolution. Now they are its most enthusiastic supporters. For example, they form over 50 percent of the popular militias, the mainstay of Nicaragua's defense against United States-sponsored invasions from Honduras and Costa Rica. In the block committees, they have virtually eliminated wife and child abuse. Yet in Nicaragua we still see maids, the double standard sexually, dissatisfaction in marriage, and inadequate childcare. Furthermore, all the women I talked to defined their participation in the revolution in terms of an extremely idealized notion of motherhood and could not understand the choice not to reproduce.

I bring up this example of Nicaragua because Nicaraguan women are very conscious of the power of their own revolutionary example. They know they have been influenced by the Vietnamese and Cuban revolutions and are very much shaping how Salvadoran women militants are looking at women's role in the Salvadoran revolution. Because of the urgency and violence of the situation, unity between men and women was and is necessary for their survival, but the women also want to combat, in an organized and self-conscious way, specific aspects of male supremacy in the workplace, politics, and daily life.

Both here and in Nicaragua, women's daily conversation is about the politics of daily life. They talk to each other often, complaining about men and about managing the domestic sphere. Women's talk also encompasses complaints about poor and unstable work conditions, and about the onerous double day. However, here in the United States that conversation usually circulates pessimistically, if supportively, around the same themes and may even serve to reconfirm women's stasis within these unpleasant situations. Here such conversation offers little sense of social change; yet in our recent political history, feminists have used this preexisting social form--women's conversation in the domestic sphere--to create consciousness-raising groups. But to what degree is consciousness raising sufficient to change women's behavior, including our self-conception and our own colonized minds?

We do not live in a revolutionary situation in the United States. There is no leftist political organization here providing leadership and a cohesive strategy, and in particular the struggle against women's oppression is not genuinely integrated into leftist activity and theory. Within such a context, women need to work on another, intermediate level, both to shape our revolutionary consciousness and to empower us to act on our own strategic demands. That is, we need to promote self-conscious, collectively supported, and politically clear articulations of our anger and rage.

Furthermore, we must understand the different structures behind different women's rage. Black women rage against poverty and racism at the same time that they rage against sexism. Lesbians rage against heterosexual privilege, including their denial of civil rights. Nicaraguan women rage against invasions and the aggressive intentions of the United States. If, in our political work, we know this anger and the structures that generate it, we can more genuinely encounter each other and more extensively acknowledge each other's needs, class position, and specific form of oppression. If we do not understand the unique social conditions shaping our sisters' rage, we run the risk of divisiveness, of fragmenting our potential solidarity. Such mutual understanding of the different structures behind different women's anger is the precondition of our finding a way to work together toward common goals.

I think a lot about the phenomenon of the colonized mind. Everything that I am and want has been shaped within a social process marked by male dominance and female submission. How can women come to understand and collectively attack this sexist social order? We all face, and in various ways incorporate into ourselves, sexist representations, sexist modes of thought. Institutionally, such representations are propagated throughout culture, law, medicine, education, and so on. All families come up against and are socially measured by sexist concepts of what is "natural"--that is, the "natural" roles of mother, children, or the family as a whole.

Of particular concern to me is the fact that I have lived with a man for fifteen years while I acutely understand the degree to which heterosexuality itself is socially constructed as sexist. That is, I love someone who has more social privilege than me, and he has that privilege because he is male. As an institution, heterosexuality projects relations of dominance and submission, and it leads to the consequent devaluation of women because of their sex. The institution of heterosexuality is the central shaping factor of many different social practices at many different levels--which range, for example, from the dependence of the mass media on manipulating sexuality to the division of labor, the split between the public and private spheres, and the relations of production under capitalism. Most painfully for women, heterosexuality is a major, a social and psychological mode of organizing, generating, focusing, and institutionalizing desire, both men's and women's. Literally, I am wedded to my own oppression.

Furthermore, the very body of woman is not her own--it has been constructed by medicine, the law, visual culture, fashion, her mother, her household tasks, her reproductive capacity, and what Ti-Grace Atkinson has called "the institution of sexual intercourse." When I look in the mirror, I see my flaws; I evaluate the show I put on to

others. How do I break through representations of the female body and gain a more just representation of my body for and of myself?

My social interactions are shaped by nonverbal conventions which we all have learned unconsciously and which are, as it were, the glue of social life. As Nancy Henley describes it in *Body Politics*, women's nonverbal language is characterized by shrinking, by taking up as little space as possible. Woman is accessible to be touched. When she speaks in a mixed group, she is likely to be interrupted or not really listened to seriously, or she may be thought of as merely emotional. And it is clear that not only does the voyeuristic male look shape most film practice, but this male gaze, with all its power, has a social analog in the way eye contact functions to control and threaten women in public space, where women's freedom is constrained by the threat of rape.

We need to articulate these levels of oppression so as to arrive at a collective, shared awareness of these aspects of women's lives. We also need to understand how we can and already do break through barriers between us. In our personal relations, we often overcome inequalities between us and establish intimacy. Originally, within the women's movement we approached the task of coming together both personally and politically through the strategy of the consciousness-raising group, where to articulate our experience as women itself became a collective, transformative experience. But these groups were often composed mostly of middle-class women, sometimes predominantly young, straight, single, and white. Now we need to think more clearly and theoretically about strategies for negotiating the very real power differences between us. It is not so impossible. Parents do this with children, and vice versa; lovers deal with inequalities all the time. The aged want to be in communion with the young, and third-world women have constantly extended themselves to their white sisters. However, when women come together in spite of power differences among them, they feel anxiety and perhaps openly express previously suppressed hostility. Most likely, such a coming together happens when women work together intensively on a mutual project so that there is time for trust to be established.

Yet as we seek mutually to articulate the oppression that constrains us, we have found few conceptual or social structures through which we might authentically express our rage. Women's anger is pervasive, as pervasive as our oppression, but it frequently lurks underground. If we added up all of women's depression--all our compulsive smiling, ego-tending, and sacrifice; all our psychosomatic illness, and all our passivity--we could gauge our rage's unarticulated, negative force. In the sphere of cultural production there are few dominant ideological forms that allow us even to think "women's rage." As ideological constructs, these forms end up containing women.

Women's rage is most often seen in the narratives that surround us. For example: Classically, Medea killed her children because she was betrayed by their father. Now, reverse-slasher movies let the raped woman pick up the gun and kill the male attacker. It is a similar posture of dead end vengeance. The news showed Patty Hearst standing in a bank with a gun embodying that manufactured concept "terrorist," and then we saw her marrying her FBI bodyguard long after her comrades went up in flames. In melodrama and film noir, as well as in pornography, women's anger is most commonly

depicted through displacement onto images of female insanity or perversity, often onto a grotesque, fearful parody of lesbianism. These displacements allow reference to and masking of individual women's rage, and that masked rage is rarely collectively expressed by women or even fully felt.

We have relatively few expressions of women's authentic rage even in women's art. Often on the news we will see a pained expression of injustice or the exploitative use of an image of a third-world woman's grief. Such images are manipulated purely for emotional effect without giving analysis or context. Some great feminist writers and speakers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Harriet Tubman have provided models by which we can understand ourselves, but too often the very concept of "heroine" means that we hold up these women and their capacity for angry self-expression as the exception rather than the rule.

In Illinois, women chained themselves together in the state house when it was clear that the ERA would not pass; the women sought to express our collective anger at our legislators' cowardice and to do so in a conspicuous, public way. But actions such as these often have little effect beyond their own time span. We need to think beyond such forms to more socially effective ones. It is a task open to all our creativity and skill--to tap our anger as a source of energy and to focus it aesthetically and politically. We may have to combine images of anger with something else--say, images of how women can construct the collectivity as a whole. It is here that, by their example, our third-world sisters have often taken the lead. Rosa Parks refusing to sit in the back of the bus, Harriet Tubman leading slaves to the North, an Angolan mother in uniform carrying a baby and a rifle, a Vietnamese farmer tilling and defending her land, Nicaraguan women in their block committees turning in wife abusers to the police--these images let us see that women can gain more for themselves than merely negating the bad that exists. And it is in their constant need to attack both sexism and racism, as well as poverty and imperialist aggression, that third-world feminists now make us all see much more clearly both the urgent need for and the possibility of reconstructing the whole world on new terms.

Artistically, emotionally, and politically women seem to need to glimpse dialectically the transcendence of our struggle against sexism before we can fully express sexism's total negation, that is, our own just rage. Sometimes our suppressed rage feels so immense that the open expression of it threatens to destroy us. So we often do not experience anger directly and consciously, nor do we accurately aim our rage at its appropriate target. To transcend negation and to build on it means that we have to see what is beyond our rage. An example of such transcendence was demonstrated by Nicaraguan mothers of "martyred" soldiers (those killed by U.S.-paid counterrevolutionaries) to Pope John Paul II when he visited Managua in April 1983. They stood in the rows closest to the podium where the Pope spoke and they all bore large photos of their dead children. As the events of the day unfolded, the women created an image that stirred the whole people, one that the Pope could not go beyond or even adequately respond to. Here is what happened: The Pope spoke on and on to the gathered crowd about obeying the hierarchy and not getting involved with the things of this world. In frustration and anger, the women began to shout, "We want peace," and their chant was taken up by the

400,000 others there. The women's rage at personal loss was valorized by the Nicaraguan people as a whole, as the grieving mother became a collective symbol of the demand for peace. The chant, "We want peace," referred simultaneously to national sovereignty, anti-imperialism, religion, and family life. The women spoke for the whole.

This brings me back to my original question about women's political action in the United States today. One of the major areas of investigation and struggle in the women's movement has been the sphere of daily life. This struggle, represented by an early women's movement phrase--"the personal is the political"--derives from women's real material labor in the domestic sphere and in the sphere of social relations as a whole. Women have traditionally done the psychological labor that keeps social relations going. In offices, in neighborhoods, at home, they often seek to make the social environment safe and "better," or more pleasant. That such labor is invisible, particularly that it is ignored within leftist theory and practice, is one of the more precise indices of women's oppression. And it is feminists' sensitivity to and analysis of social process that clarifies for them the sexism on the Left. Often at a leftist conference or political meeting, many men continue to see women and women's concerns as "other," and they do not look at what the Left could gain from feminist theory or from women's subcultural experience or from an analysis of women's labor. Women who come to such an event have already made a commitment to learn and to contribute, so they make an effort to continue along with the group as a whole but are impeded by sexist speakers' intellectual poverty (e.g., use of the generic "he"), macho debating style, and distance from political activism. Furthermore, not only women feel this political invisibility at leftist events. When black labor and black subcultural experience in the United States is not dealt with, nor is imperialism, or when racism is theoretically subsumed under the rubric of "class oppression" and not accorded its specificity, then third-world participants face the same alienation.

To demonstrate this process and analyze what divides us, I will describe an incident that occurred at the Teaching Institute on Marxist Cultural Theory in June 1983. It is worth discussing because it is the kind of incident that happens all too often among us on the Left. Early in that summer session, a coalition of students and the two women faculty members, Gayatri Spivak and me, formed to present a protest statement to the faculty. It was read in every class. Here is what it said:

The Marxist-Feminist Caucus met on Friday June 17th and concluded that the "limits, frontiers and boundaries" of Marxist cultural theory as articulated by the Teaching Institute excluded and silenced crucial issues of sexism, racism and other forms of domination. We find ourselves reproducing in the classrooms of the Teaching Institute the very structures which are the object of our critique. The Marxist-Feminist Caucus therefore proposes that each class set aside an hour weekly to discuss strategic silences and structural exclusions. A Marxism that does not problematize issues of gender and race, or of class consciousness in its own ranks, cannot hope to be an adequate tool for either social criticism or social transformation.

The institute had a format of having famous Marxist intellectuals lecture, specifically males with job security who have never incorporated a feminist analysis into their

theoretical work. Both the format and the content of their lectures enraged some of us, but not others. In a sense, writing a protest statement divided the school's participants between the political ones and the consumers of Marxist theory. This is because critical theory itself has become a pathway for elitist advancement in the humanities and social sciences in universities where these areas are facing huge cutbacks. And the canon of that critical theory is based on Marx and Freud and their contemporary interpretants, Althusser and Lacan. Both at the Teaching Institute and at prestigious universities, young academics could get their quick fix of Marxism, the knowledge of which could help greatly in their academic career.

This is a capitalist mode of consuming knowledge. Too many students, especially career-pressured graduate students, want only a well conceived lecture, a digest of Marxist theory and social analysis, something that can be written in a notebook, taken home, and quoted from in a future paper or journal article. Furthermore, we intellectuals fall into this capitalist competitive mode. We feel pressured inside ourselves to be the best. Students are told to buy the best. All the faculty at the Teaching Institute felt that they could not make a mistake, that they had to read and show they had read everything, that they had been challenged on their political practice, accused of being racist or sexist or undemocratic. Our control over the classroom and studied theoretical polish became a kind of professional hysteria and worked against the collective building of Marxist knowledge and theory that we have needed for more effective social change.

Since the early 1970s women have come together in meetings like these, in feminist seminars, caucuses, and workshops, partly in resistance to a certain macho leftist or academic style and partly to build a new body of knowledge and feminist political practice. And we have been successful at doing this but it has meant double or triple work for us. Feminist scholarship does not usually lead to academic promotion for a woman. The knowledge women produce is easily marginalized, as was made painfully obvious at that summer school.

Feminists and third-world students came to the Teaching Institute knowing how much they needed Marxist theory. They understood that abolishing capitalism and imperialism was the precondition for liberation. They came as political participants expecting to learn theoretical tools to use in fighting oppression. But sex and race were too often ignored--I would say stupidly ignored--as social determinants in the theories presented about social change. (Beyond that, students felt intimidated by name-dropping and teachers' and other students' failure to explain terms. They felt they had to give a polished rebuttal or a cohesive "strategic intervention" before they could speak to refute a lecturer's point.) And when students raised issues of sexism or racism, deflection became the all too frequent tactic used by teachers or some of the white male students in response. No wonder that women, with their sex-role socialization, were often too intimidated to speak.

This is a sad analysis, but not an infrequent one in academia. It speaks about political theory and academic sexism and racism, and elitism and class privilege. The incident reveals much of what divides politically progressive people in the United States. These differences must be acknowledged in depth if we are to work together politically in a

coalition form. In particular, I understand the texture of women's silence in a forum that demanded a highly rational and developed intervention. Many of the women students at the Teaching Institute already produced feminist theory, but the intimidating nature of this kind of aggressive public speaking made them seem like nonparticipants. And it often happens to me, too. I know that we watch and despair of our own colonized psyches which hold us back in silence precisely when we would choose to be political actors, especially in a Marxist forum.

What we have seen in the 1970s and 1980s in North America and Europe is a supercession of political forms related to developments in radical consciousness. Conditions have evolved in the United States that make it impossible to conceive of a revolutionary organizing strategy that does not embrace a black and minority revolution and a feminist revolution. The lesson of the civil rights/black power movement was that blacks will organize autonomously. Now it is the offspring of that movement, Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, that has taken the lead in building an anti-imperialist coalition that addresses the specific struggles and organizing forms of blacks, Latinos, women, and gays. Such a coalition relates to the existence of the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the anti-imperialist movement, by supporting these groups' autonomous organizing and granting new respect, not by subsuming or controlling them. Furthermore, at this point in U.S. history, issues of mass culture and mass communication have to be dealt with, so that minority figures such as Jesse Jackson or Harold Washington, Chicago's black mayor, have developed an ongoing analysis about racism in the press.

As a feminist who has worked both in the cultural sphere and in anti-imperialist work, I have experienced this supercession of forms. In the early 1970s a politically active woman was either "on the Left" or "in the independent women's movement." Some socialist feminists within leftist organizations formed caucuses to try to influence their organizations. In the 1970s I chose to work mostly within the independent women's movement, especially in creating a women's studies program at an urban university. In developing feminist media now within the women's movement, I find many of my sisters addressing broader issues of imperialism, racism, class oppression, and the nuclear threat. Many of us are joining progressive coalitions around these issues. Within these coalitions we must be able openly to declare, "I am a feminist and our feminist position represents the most advanced stand. You men have to join us." Indeed, many men, often younger men, have. As feminists, we are the ones who are building a whole theoretical critique of mass culture and mass communication; we are the ones who are learning how to appropriate all of culture in an oppositional way. And because of our historical position in advanced capitalism, we are one of the first social movements to address cultural issues in such a thorough and complex way.

Many feminists are eager to participate in coalitions, the major political strategy for us in the 1980s. In Chicago, we saw the women's movement and the Left work to elect Harold Washington. In the San Francisco area, gays and lesbians have formed a Central America support group. Both in the United States and abroad, the antinuclear movement contains within it all-women's affinity groups. Latinos in various areas identify and organize as Puerto Rican or Mexican-American according to their ethnic

origins and concentration, and also unite in Central American solidarity work. This great diversity of sectoral organizing enriches all of us who are working for social change.

Some of the best aspects of current progressive organizing have, in fact, derived specifically from the development of the contemporary women's movement. I mentioned the consciousness-raising groups earlier. I think the women's movement has introduced into political discourse an open and direct critique of the macho style and political posturing of many male leaders. As feminist activists, we have created among ourselves new forms of discussion and a creative, collective pursuit of knowledge--in contrast to an older, more aggressive, male debating style. Particularly important for me, the women's movement has pursued and validated as politically important cultural and artistic work. In Chicago, where I live, I experience a strong continuum and network among community-based artists and women in the art world. We have built up intellectual ties between academic women and feminist film- and videomakers who have created an analysis of how sexuality is manipulated in the visual culture that surrounds us. As a consequence, feminist film criticism has developed a new theoretical framework for analyzing ideology and the mass media. In fact, I think that our building of a feminist cultural theory has made a key contribution to the Left and to revolutionary movements throughout the world.

When I want to consider how unleashing our anger might capacitate us to act for change, I reconsider Frantz Fanon's essay "Concerning Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth*. In that essay he describes decolonization, particularly the process by which the native sheds the colonizer's values and the colonizer's ways. I understand that my black and Latina sisters in the United States experience a rage against the economic and racial violence perpetrated every day against them; in a way that is similar to what Fanon describes: this rage knows its resolution lies in a complete change of the economic order in which we live. At the same time, I must ask what kind of rage it would be that would effectively contest women's oppression--given all the levels at which gender inequality and women's oppression is articulated in social and personal life. What Fanon describes to us is a specific historical moment at which mental colonization can be and is surpassed. As I look at women's mental colonization, I see our internalized sense of powerlessness, our articulation into masochistic structures of desire, and our playing out of personae that on the surface seem "passive," "self-defeating," "irrational," "hesitant," "receptively feminine," or even "crazy." Much of this behavior stems from internalized and suppressed rage. Fanon describes such behavior in the colonized and posits active rage, the violent response to violence, as its cure.

What would the overturning of male supremacy and women's colonization mean to women? How would it be accomplished? Fanon understands that a whole social structure and a new kind of person must come into being, and that those with privilege know, fear, and resist this. His call to armed struggle, based on the very clear demarcations and abuses of power that the native always sees, signals a survival struggle that does not characterize the war between the sexes. As I read Fanon for what he can teach me about women's resistance to oppression in nonrevolutionary society, I read him as a communist psychiatrist talking about how social movements can change the

mentality of the oppressed. When I ask about revolution for women now, minimally I see that our contestation cannot be conducted in the mode of nice girls, of managing the egos of and patiently teaching those who oppress, which is a skill and duty we learned from our mothers in the domestic sphere. If we do so, once again we will be placed in that very role of "helpmate" that we are trying to overcome. Angry contestation may take us the extra step needed to overcome our own colonized behavior and tardy response.

Let me now rewrite for you parts of Fanon's essay to show its power when discussing the relation between psychological and social change. The distance between the violence of colonization and its necessary response in armed struggle, and the emotional rage I am referring to here in combating sexism, marks the distance between the periphery and the center of international capitalism. By using Fanon in this way, I do not wish to co-opt him for the women's movement but to learn from him, just as I learned from the Nicaraguan women's courage and tenacity. If women must learn to be openly angry, we must learn to draw links between ourselves and those who are more oppressed, to learn new methods of struggle and courageous response.

Combating women's oppression as we know it is a historical process: that is to say, it cannot become intelligible or clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements that give it historical form and content. Combating women's oppression is the meeting of two intrinsically opposed forces, which in fact owe this originality to that sort of substantification that results from and is nourished by the social construction of gender. The husband is right when he speaks of knowing "them" well--for it is men who perpetuate the function of wife. Men owe the reproduction of their bodies and psyches to the family.

Feminist revolution never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms passive femininity crushed with inessentiality into privileged agency under the floodlights of history. A new kind of woman brings a new rhythm into existence with a new language and a new humanity; combating women's oppression means the veritable creation of new women who become fully human by the same process by which they freed themselves.

Feminists who decide to put their program into practice and become its moving force are ready to be constantly enraged. They have collectively learned that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called into question by absolute contestation.

The sex-gender system is a world divided into compartments. And if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at last be able to reveal the lines of force it implies and to mark out the lines on which a nonoppressive society will be reorganized.

At the level of individuals, anger is a cleansing force. It frees the woman from her inferiority complex and from despair and inaction; it makes her fearless and restores her self-respect.

At this point I will stop citing from and reworking Fanon, deliberately at the point of individual rage. Now is a time when we need to work in coalitions, but we must be very honest about what divides us and what are the preconditions we need before we can work together. I have made the decision to work in leftist and feminist cultural work and in Latin American solidarity work. I think in all our strategies we must analyze the relation of that strategy to feminist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist demands. Women comprise over half the population; any class issues in the United States are intimately tied to the question of racism; we all live off the labor of workers, often underpaid women, in the Third World; and socialist revolution is being waged very near us. Personally, I know that it is by my contact with Nicaraguan women, who insist that men and women must struggle together for our mutual liberation, that I have been politically and emotionally renewed.

The problems grow more acute. We know that the Right is racist, homophobic, and sexist. We in the women's movement must stop turning our anger against each other and learn the most effective ways to work together for social change. We can focus our anger and harness it, but to do that we must clearly analyze cause and effect. If theory accompanies anger, it will lead to effective solutions to the problems at hand. We have great emotional and social power to unleash when we set loose our all too often suppressed rage, but we may only feel free to do so when we know that we can use our anger in an astute and responsible way.